

# Some Questions about *The Moving Spotlight*\*

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1. I don't like sports, but it is a sports metaphor that comes to mind: if my team were out of the playoffs, I'd be rooting for Ross. Unlike Ross, I think that The Block Universe Theory of Time is true, but like Ross I've argued that the best alternative, the theory it should be squaring off against in the World Series of The Philosophy of Time, is The Moving Spotlight Theory. I came to Ross's book, therefore, curious about how his argument for this claim was going to go.

Parts of the book really opened my eyes. I'm thinking especially of Ross's discussion of the argument that the presentist can, while the moving spotlight theorist cannot, accept the claim that they know that they are present; and his discussion of the relationship between what one might call "ordinary modal talk" and the metaphysics of modality in a certain version (Phillip Bricker's) of Modal Realism. Other parts of the book left me a bit confused. In this piece I'm going to say something about (some of) those bits.

2. Ross says he intends his book to unfold like a detective novel. Part of the mystery the protagonist is trying to solve is: just what does the best version of The Moving Spotlight Theory of time look like? One early clue comes in Chapter 2, in the discussion of McTaggart's argument that time is unreal. McTaggart's argument is best thought of as a crazily-shaped ink blot one may use for inspiration, rather than as a definite argument one might have misunderstood because one did not pay close enough attention to exactly what McTaggart wrote. So what is McTaggart's

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argument as it struck Ross, as it presented a problem for him?

Ross's McTaggart focuses on a principle he calls PAST RECORD. In his words, the principle is

PAST RECORD: If something was the case, then it *is* the case in the past (64).

Ross's McTaggart argues that (i) The Moving Spotlight Theory is inconsistent with PAST RECORD; but (ii) The Moving Spotlight Theory is unmotivated if PAST RECORD is false. If these are right, they constitute grim news for The Moving Spotlight Theory.

When I first read Ross's argument I was like: *right on*. PAST RECORD looks like something a believer in The Block Universe Theory of time would accept (I say this as a believer myself); no way should a Moving Spotlight Theorist accept it, accepting it will surely get him in trouble.

But when I looked more closely at Ross's McTaggart's argument, I got really confused. My first question for Ross will be: help me out, man. What exactly is the argument?

In order to confess my confusion I need to show you the argument as Ross's McTaggart presents it. Here it is:

[O]ne way things were is that M [an instant of time], which is now present, was future. So M's being future is a way things were; M's being future is something that was the case. So by PAST RECORD, M's being future *is* (atemporal "is") the case, in the past. But M is now present, and how things are now is also a part of how things atemporally are across time. So both M's being present and M's being future are the case, atemporally. So now ask the question: what is M like? Not: what is M like *now*? What is M like, *simpliciter*? It looks like there is pressure to say both that M is present simpliciter and that M is future simpliciter, since both M's being present and M's being future are the case, atemporally speaking. To say merely that M is present simpliciter is to ignore the sense in which M's being future is a part of how things are, and likewise *mutatis mutandis* if we say merely that M is future

simpliciter. It looks like we have to say both things, to respect both the reality of how things are now and the reality of how things were. And yet we *cannot* say them both, for surely nothing is both present and future simpliciter. (65)

Okay, so one premise of this argument is definitely supposed to be

- (1) M was future. (Take this to abbreviate the more natural: M is an instant of time that was a future instant of time.)

And we're definitely supposed to apply PAST RECORD to (1). But it's not at all clear to me how to do that. The problem is that PAST RECORD is stated at such a high level of generality. My first interpretive move, then, was to try to use a restricted version of PAST RECORD that clearly applied to (1). The restricted version I came up with is

- PAST RECORD (special case): If x was F, then there is a time T such that T is a past time (a time earlier than the present time), and x *is* F at T.

Here the italicized "*is*" is supposed to be a "tenseless" is. My thought was that PAST RECORD (special case) is just what PAST RECORD says about simple sentences of the form "x was F." Okay, now one instance of PAST RECORD (special case) is

- (2) If M was future, then there is a time T such that T is a past time and M *is* future at T.

And from (1) and (2) we can clearly infer

- (3) There is a time T such that T is a past time and M *is* future at T.

Having got this far, I interpreted Ross's McTaggart as next making another two claims and drawing another inference:

- (4) M is present. ("M is the present instant of time.")
- (5) If M is present, then there is a time T such that T is the present time and M *is* present at T.
- (6) Therefore, there is a time T such that T is the present time and M *is* present at T.

Here the idea is that (5) is an instance of the “present analogue” of PAST RECORD. It is in fact simplest if we assume that PAST RECORD includes also an analogous principle PRESENT RECORD concerning the present tense and the present.

Now this is where I got really puzzled. Ross’s McTaggart says that “there is pressure to say both that M is present simpliciter and that M is future simpliciter.” That sounds like he wants to infer from (3) and (6) the following:

(7) M *is* future (simpliciter).

(8) M *is* present (simpliciter).

It would be really bad to reach this pair of conclusions; they are certainly not both true. Since premises (1) and (4) are obviously right, if indeed PAST RECORD were the only other premise, we would have the result that any theory that contained PAST RECORD would be inconsistent.

But but **but**: PAST RECORD *is not the only other premise*. (7) and (8) do not follow from the earlier lines alone; we need also a principle

- Temporal Adverbial Dropping (TAD): If *x is F at T*, then *x is F* (simpliciter).<sup>1</sup>

And that’s crazy. If I were evaluating this argument, I would say that since (TAD) is obviously bad, maybe there isn’t a problem with PAST RECORD after all. But Ross’s McTaggart is targeting PAST RECORD. Since Ross’s McTaggart isn’t dumb, I must be missing something. But what? I need help.

Now there are philosophers who have accepted principles that resemble (TAD). Here is one:

- Four-Dimensionalist TAD (4D-TAD): If *x is F at T* then the T-temporal part of *x is F* simpliciter.

(TAD) is crazy. (4D-TAD) is maybe not so crazy, if you’re a believer in temporal parts. Anyway, (4D-TAD) is not relevant to the argument, since you can’t use it to

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<sup>1</sup>Then from this and (6) we can infer “There is a T such that T is present and M *is* present simpliciter”; since “M *is* present simpliciter” does not contain “T” free, it itself follows from this sentence.

get line (7) from line (3) (assuming that M has only one temporal part, and that it is not a T-temporal part for any past time T).

**3.** Anyway: Ross wants a version of The Moving Spotlight Theory that does not endorse PAST RECORD. Another landmark he steers to avoid is “The Stuck Spotlight Theory With a Fancy Semantics.” He wants a theory that isn’t like that one. What is this theory? What’s so bad about it? Here is Ross:

Consider the “stuck spotlight” view: the past, present, and future all exist, the present time is objectively privileged, and it never changes that it is *that* time that is privileged. . . . were things that way, nothing would stop us adopting Bricker’s clause as a way of speaking. (80)

Let me interrupt to say what Bricker’s clause is. The clause states the truth-conditions for sentences of the form “T was/will be present” as they are used in ordinary English. (Bricker actually writes about “W is/could be actual”; Ross is discussing an adaptation of Bricker’s ideas from the case of modality to the case of time.) The truth-conditions are: “T was/will be present” is true at time S iff there is a time U earlier/later than S such that T=U (I have simplified the clause a bit). According to these truth-conditions, “Times in the year 3000 will be present” is true in ordinary English in the Stuck Spotlight Theory, even though the spotlight of presentness is stuck at one time, since for each time in the year 3000 there is a future time identical to it. Okay, back to Ross:

Even though we knew the spotlight never moved and that no time other than the actual present ever was or ever will be present, we can still talk *as if* past times were present and future times will be. Just say that a time is present at itself if and only if it is identical to itself. If we start to talk this way, we will start saying exactly the same things as the moving spotlighter. But we have not changed the metaphysics, we have just started using tensed language in a way that does not reflect the underlying metaphysics. So there is a worry that the moving spotlighter, if she adopted the Bricker proposal, could not distinguish herself from the stuck spotlighter with a fancy semantics. (80)

A bit more light is shed on the Stuck Spotlight Theory much later, when Ross compares his theory to it:

I think my moving spotlighthouse adequately distinguishes herself from the stuck spotlight theorist precisely because she is *not* simply taking the B-Theorist's metaphysic and *adding* to that metaphysic that one time out of many be objectively privileged. For the stuck spotlighthouse, to say that another time will be present is just a way of speaking, not reflective of anything in the metaphysics. Nothing would be lost—you would not do a worse job of describing reality—if you did not adopt the fancy semantics and simply gave a tenseless description of reality. (167)

In Ross's exposition the Stuck Spotlight Theory is a moving target. In fact I count two Stuck Spotlight Theories that make appearances in Ross's discussion. Here is how I would formulate one of them:

Stuck Spotlight One: Fundamentally speaking, exactly one time, call it N, is present. Fundamentally speaking, that time always has been and always will be present. Fundamentally speaking, which time is present has never and will never change. But in ordinary English in ordinary contexts, "Noon, New Years' Day, in the year 3000 will be present" does not mean "Fundamentally speaking, Noon, New Years' Day, in the year 3000 will be present." Instead, the truth-condition for this sentence in those contexts is: there is a time T later than N such that Noon, New Years' Day, in the year 3000 is identical to T. Since this claim is true, "Noon, New Years' Day, in the year 3000 will be present" is true in ordinary contexts.

I agree with Ross: this is a dumb theory. But it's not the only Stuck Spotlight Theory around, nor is it the only Stuck Spotlight Theory that Ross discusses. Ross says that The Stuck Spotlight Theory can be arrived at by starting with the B-theory of time, which I prefer to call The Block Universe Theory of Time, and adding to it two things: a fact about which time is "objectively present," and some "fancy semantics." But I do not recognize The Block Universe Theory anywhere in Stuck

Spotlight One. An exposition of a theory that added to The Block Universe Theory a fact about which time is present would be making a big mistake if it said: fundamentally speaking that time has always been present. The Block Universe Theory, at least as I understand it, and as proponents like J. J. C. Smart and W. V. O. Quine understood it, is a “tenseless” theory, in the sense that its description of what the world is like, fundamentally speaking, is expressed in a tenseless language. And “N has always been present” is not written in a tenseless language.

So let’s take a closer look at what a Stuck Spotlight Theory that is built on The Block Universe Theory properly-understood should look like. Here is how I would put it:

Stuck Spotlight Two: Fundamentally speaking, exactly one time, call it N, *is* (this is a tenseless “is”) present. What, then, is the truth-condition, in fundamental terms, for the tensed (English) sentence “Noon, New Years’ Day, in the year 3000 will be present”? Just this: there is a time T later than N such that Noon, New Years’ Day, in the year 3000 is identical to T. Since this claim is true, “Noon, New Years’ Day, in the year 3000 will be present” is true in English.

One of Ross’s complaints about “The” Stuck Spotlight Theory is that while it says that “Times in the year 3000 will be present” is true in ordinary contexts, it also says that, fundamentally speaking, no time in the year 3000 will be present; and a theory that treats the passage of time as a real phenomenon shouldn’t say something that amounts to: fundamentally speaking, time does not pass.

This complaint, however, applies only to Stuck Spotlight One. It does not touch Stuck Spotlight Two. If you ask Stuck Spotlight Two: fundamentally speaking, will the year 3000 be present? The theory will answer: that doesn’t make any sense. Your question is meaningless. A completion of “Fundamentally speaking, ...” cannot use tensed verb-forms.

Stuck Spotlight Two does not suffer from the double-vision of Stuck Spotlight One. It does not say that in one sense, time passes, even though in another, more fundamental sense, time does not pass. It says that, *in the most fundamental sense in which the question of whether time passes is meaningful*, time does pass. So what’s wrong? Isn’t that what we want a Moving Spotlight Theory to say?

I don't really want to defend Stuck Spotlight Two, but if I did I would add at this point that "Stuck Spotlight" is a misleading and frankly mean name to give the theory. The Spotlight is *not* stuck. To say it is stuck is to say that it does not move, that is, that no future time will be present. The theory does *not* say this.

Ross might reply that if you're after a theory that takes the passage of time seriously, it is not enough for it to say that *in the most fundamental sense in which the question of whether time passes is intelligible*, time passes (later times will be present); it must also say that *this question makes sense in fundamental terms*. This amounts to demanding that if T is a time later than the present time, then the fact that T will be present is a fundamental fact.

But Ross is not in a position to make this demand. *His* theory does not satisfy this demand. On his view, every fundamental fact is a "pure existence fact": the fundamental facts all have the form [x exists]. He does think that the fact that T will be present *obtains*; but it is not fundamental, it is grounded in pure existence facts.

At one point in the passages I quoted earlier Ross wrote this:

For the stuck spotlihter, to say that another time will be present is just a way of speaking, not reflective of anything in the metaphysics. Nothing would be lost—you would not do a worse job of describing reality—if you did not adopt the fancy semantics and simply gave a tenseless description of reality.

I have to say I don't really understand what is going on here. If the target is Stuck Spotlight Two, this just seems false. A proponent of that theory has two choices. One option is to say that the fact that a later time will be present is *identical* to the fact that some time later than this time *is* (tenseless) self-identical. Since this second fact is certainly "reflective of something in the metaphysics," so is the first, since they're the same fact. The second option is to deny that they are the same fact, and say instead that the second fact grounds the first fact. Well then if you just gave a tenseless description of reality in fundamental terms, you *would* do a worse job of describing reality than if you gave that description, and then added that times in 3000 will be present. For you would have left that fact out of your description. True, the fact you left out is grounded in facts you included—but it is a fact nonetheless.



A final point: Ross is using “fancy” as a pejorative. But what’s wrong with having a fancy semantics (and in what sense is it fancy, anyway)? Isn’t the criterion for judging a semantics *whether it is true*, not *how fancy it is*?

Ross’s use of the word “fancy,” and his claim that although “Times in 3000 will be present” is true this is “just a way of speaking,” suggests that he approaches the project of evaluating metaphysical theories like this: when you evaluate a theory, all that matters is what that theory says reality is like at the fundamental level. It doesn’t matter what the theory says it takes for a non-fundamental description to be true in fundamental terms. Why would anyone think this? One diagnosis is that they are assuming that a metaphysical theory is free to say whatever it likes about how the non-fundamental is made true by the fundamental. But this just is not the case. When Stuck Spotlight Two says that “T will be present” is true iff T is identical to some time later than N, we don’t have to respond with “well if you say so.” This part of the theory is a thesis it is putting forward, that may well be false. Maybe the True Laws of Metasemantics say: if at the fundamental level the world is as Stuck Spotlight Two says it is, then in fact “T will be present” as used in ordinary English does *not* have the truth-condition: T is identical to a time later than N. If so, Stuck Spotlight Two is false, even if it is right about what things are like fundamentally speaking. I think this is a better place to attack the theory: not to accuse its semantics of being “fancy,” but to accuse its semantics of being false, even on the assumption that the theory is right about fundamental matters.

4. Ross states his version of The Moving Spotlight Theory in chapter 4; his argument that it is superior to other versions is supposed to depend on his meta-metaphysical commitments, which he lays out in chapter 3. I was confused about the relationship between these two, so will take this chance to ask Ross about it.

Ross holds that we should reject the “Quine-Lewis-Sider” meta-metaphysics, and instead accept the Fine-Cameron meta-metaphysics. Roughly speaking, the QLS meta-metaphysics enjoins us to evaluate a metaphysical theory on two criteria: (i) how simple is its fundamental ontology (the collection of things it says exist in the most fundamental sense)?; and (ii) how simple is its fundamental ideology (roughly, the set of undefined expressions it uses to describe reality at the funda-

mental level)? The Fine-Cameron meta-metaphysics instead enjoins us to evaluate a theory on one criterion: how simple is its collection of fundamental facts?

On this theory, every fact is either a fundamental fact, or ultimately grounded in fundamental facts. And it does not matter how complicated the language is that you need to use to express the fundamental facts; all that matters is how complicated the set of fundamental facts “itself” is.

Ross prefers an especially austere set of fundamental facts: on his view, every fundamental fact is a fact of the form [x exists]. It turns out that in each case the x is a “state of affairs.”

Okay, that is the ten-second version of what happens in chapter 3. Chapter 4 then discusses two theories of what fact(s) ground, for example, the fact that Ross used to be 4ft tall. One theory, “Lucretianism,” a form of presentism, says: the fact that Ross used to be 4ft tall is grounded in the fact that Ross (now) has the property of having been 4ft tall. Another theory, the one Ross prefers, which is a version of The Moving Spotlight Theory, says: the fact that Ross used to be 4ft tall is grounded in (i) the fact that Ross has a certain “distributional property,” a property that encodes how tall Ross is at each time, together with (ii) the fact that Ross is a certain age. Ross’s theory is supposed to be better because it satisfies the requirement of “Intrinsic Determination”: “For all objects x and sparse properties F and times t, if x instantiates F at t, then x has the intrinsic nature at t that it has partly in virtue of instantiating F at t” (136). If Lucretianism is true, this requirement is violated: for Ross instantiates *having been 4ft tall* now (and this is a sparse property), but does not have his current intrinsic nature partly in virtue of instantiating that property. But if Ross’s theory is true, this requirement is met: both his having that distributional property and his having that age make a difference to his current intrinsic nature.

I was left unsure how this argument fit together with the meta-metaphysics from chapter 3. Here was my thought: look, if the presentist and moving spotlight theorist are both Rossians, they will agree that the fact that Ross used to be 4ft tall is ultimately grounded in some facts of the form [x exists]—for every fact is ultimately grounded in facts like this. So this debate between Ross and the Lucretianist cannot be a debate about what the fundamental facts look like. It must be a debate about

what facts are “intermediate grounds” for the fact that Ross was 4ft tall. The idea must be: no fundamental fact grounds this fact directly; instead it grounds some middle fact(s), which in turn ground the fact that Ross used to be 4ft tall. Ross and the Lucretian disagree about what these middle facts look like.

But if I’m a Rossian, why should I think there are any middle facts in the first place? Why can’t I say that the fact that Ross was 4ft tall is directly grounded in some existence fact [x exists]? As far as I can tell, this theory satisfies Intrinsic Determination vacuously, since it nowhere says that anything instantiates any (sparse) properties.

5. Ross argues in his book that “endurantist” theories of persistence must be bundled together with an “A-theory” of time. Here is the argument:

... a satisfactory account of persistence through change has to do more than simply be consistent; it must also account for the *change in appearances*. A theory of how I persist through time must account for not just how it can consistently be the case that I am now 6ft tall but was 5ft tall, but also must account for why, when you look at me now, I appear to be 6ft tall but do not appear to be 5ft tall, and why, when you looked at me when I was ten years old, I appeared to be 5ft tall but did not appear to be 6ft tall. ...

... [O]n both van Inwagen’s and Haslanger’s views, you encounter the entirety of a thing at every time at which you encounter any of it (for they are endurantist views: objects are wholly present at every time at which they exist), and how the objects are, simpliciter, does not change from one time to another. How, then, can a change in appearance be accounted for?

I am 6ft tall but was 5ft tall. So on van Inwagen’s view, that is a matter of me bearing the *is 6ft at* relation to the present time t1, and bearing the *is 5ft at* relation to a past time t2. But my standing in those relations to those times is not itself something that is subject to change. ... I bear the *is 6ft at* relation to t1 and the *is 5ft at* relation to t2 *now*. Why, then, do I now look 6ft tall and not 5ft tall? I now enter into both

relations; why is only one affecting my appearance?

... The obtaining of the *is 5ft at* relation between me and t2 and the obtaining of the *is 6ft at* relation between me and t1 are both equally real. And when you look at me now you look at the thing that is the other relatum of both these relations. You are looking at *all* of me, and I enter into both those relations to those different and equally real times. There is no metaphysical reason to privilege the obtaining of one relational fact over the other. So why should the appearances reflect only my standing in the *is 6ft at* relation to t1 and not my standing in the *is 5ft at* relation to t2? (153–154)

I want to change the example. It won't matter for the substance of the dispute, but it will make for an example that is easier to work with. So suppose some genius chemists have engineered a wall that is able to change color. At noon the wall is red, and slowly its color changes until at 1pm it is green. Here I am, sitting in front of the wall at 1pm, and it looks green to me. The pointed—supposedly unanswerable—question is, how can an endurantist of the van Inwagen variety “account” for this appearance? But I really don't see what the problem is. At the time  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$  some photons hit the wall. Because the wall was green at that time (its color changes slowly enough and  $\epsilon$  and  $\delta$  are small enough that it was already green back then) it reflected only the “green” photons (those with wavelengths between 495 and 570 nanometers). Some of those green photons hit my retinas at  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon$ ; no photons of any other colors hit my retinas then. Neurons fired like crazy in my brain; finally, at 1pm, I have a visual experience as of a green wall. Since no red photons hit my retina, I do not *also* have a visual experience as of a red wall at 1pm. End of story.

The story doesn't get any worse if we couch it in the terms Ross used. The wall bears the “is red at” relation to noon, and the “is green at” relation to 1pm (and also to  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$  and times in between). Some photons bear the “is hitting the wall at” relation to  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$ . Of those, only the green ones bear the “is being reflected by the wall at” relation to  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$ . Those photons then bear the “is hitting Skow's retina at” relation to  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon$ . I then bear the “is having a visual experience as of a green wall” at relation to 1pm. I do not bear the “is having a visual experience as of a red wall at” to 1pm. Doesn't the theory, therefore, account

for the appearances?

When I try to imagine how Ross might reply, I come up with something like this: when those green photons hit the wall at  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$ , then encounter *all* of the wall. But while the wall bears the “is disposed to reflect only green photons at” relation to  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$ , it also bears the “is disposed to reflect only red photons at” to noon. How, then, does the wall “know” which photons to reflect? But this question is not hard to answer. If a green photon bears the “is hitting the wall at” relation to T, the wall bears the “reflects that photon at” relation to T if and only if the wall bears the “is disposed to reflect green photons at” relation to T. It doesn’t matter what other disposed-to-reflect relations it bears to other times.

Ross suggests that “There is no metaphysical reason to privilege the obtaining of one relational fact over the other.” My account certainly in some sense privileges the fact that the wall bears the “is disposed to reflect green photons at” relation to  $1\text{pm} - \epsilon - \delta$  over the fact that it bears the “is disposed to reflect red photons at” relation to noon. Am I doing something for which there is no metaphysical reason? Ross is right that there is no metaphysical reason to privilege one of these facts over another in an *absolute* way. But the endurantist doesn’t need to privilege the obtaining of one relational fact over another in any absolute way. She only needs to privilege the obtaining of the “is disposed to reflect only green photons” relation *relative to* the obtaining of the “is hitting the wall” relation. And it is privileged in this relative way: the “is disposed to reflect only green photons” relation, unlike the “is disposed to reflect only red photons” relation, is borne by the wall to the same time that the green photons bear the “is hitting the wall” relation to.